

A Responsibility to Report — The Role of the Media in the Rwanda Genocide



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By Nadine Robitaille

"Darfur is Rwanda in slow motion," warns Allan Thompson. "The media is not there, they don't have — or don't devote — the resources to cover the Darfur story in a systematic way. It's remote, it's difficult, but so are lots of other stories they do devote resources to."

The veteran journalist and assistant professor at Carleton University's School of Journalism and Communications has had Rwanda on his radar since the mid-1990s when he first visited the African nation.

"I was there as a journalist with *The Toronto Star* in 1996 when Canada was supposed to be leading a peacekeeping mission and I literally had a life-altering experience," says Thompson. "I got very engaged in the Rwanda story itself — the genocide and the aftermath."

That interest culminated in *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, edited by Thompson and copublished by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Pluto Press, and Fountain Publishers in February 2007.

"Rwanda does get inside you and, I think to some degree I have been trying to make amends for not having been there in 1994," says Thompson.

A violent story

Thanks in part to the 2004 Hollywood film *Hotel Rwanda*, and *Shake Hands with the Devil* — the autobiography and documentary (and soon to be feature film) recounting the experiences of

Canada's Roméo Dallaire, the former head of the UN peacekeeping mission to Rwanda — most people are now aware of the events that took place in Rwanda in 1994.

Longstanding tension between the majority Hutus and minority Tutsis escalated into brutal violence when a plane carrying Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, was shot down above Kigali airport on April 6, 1994.

Within hours of the attack and Habyarimana's death, a campaign of violence spread from the capital throughout the country. It did not subside until mid-July. In the space of 100 days, at least 800 000 and as many as 1.1 million Tutsis and moderate Hutus were murdered.

In the nearly 13 years since, much has been written about the role local media played in perpetuating hatred and fear, which led to more bloodshed. Broadcasts by *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines* (RTLM), created by the Hutu power movement, was instrumental in fuelling the genocide by demonizing both Tutsis and Hutus who were pro-Tutsi.

"RTLM was the soundtrack of the genocide," says Thompson. "It dehumanized Tutsis, desensitized people to violence, and, in some instances, actually gave people instructions on how to kill and where to find fleeing Tutsis."

Ignorance is not bliss

What has been less explored is the role the international media may have played through lack of attention in facilitating or prolonging the genocide. Rather than being front page news, the events unfolding in Rwanda were largely ignored. Media coverage concentrated on the evacuation of foreigners.

"The media, like so many others in Rwanda, failed. The world powers failed. Individually we failed." — Senator Roméo Dallaire

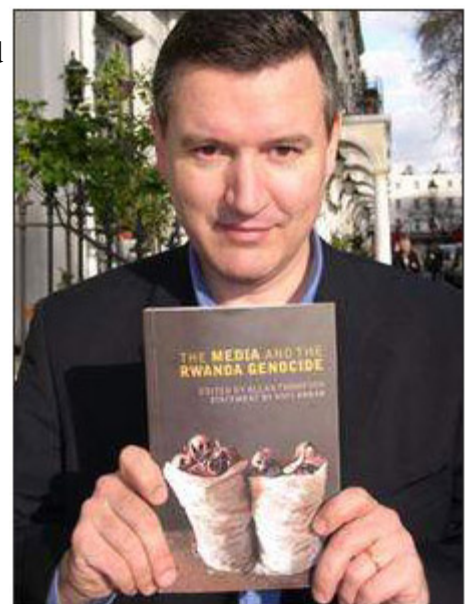
"How is it that we didn't cover this properly?" says Thompson. "How could it be that an event of this magnitude was ignored? 10 000 people were killed each day. That's three 9/11s a day for a hundred days — and we barely noticed it? It's mind-boggling. What went wrong in the media system that caused us to fail?"

Thompson has a more chilling question — one that is at the heart of his book: "Would it have made a difference had there been more coverage? If images of the massacre had been broadcast on the news, would the public have demanded action from the international community? Could we have helped stop this?"

What *was* getting attention in North America leading up to and during the genocide? The O.J. Simpson trial, the winter Olympics, and the bizarre rivalry between American figure skaters Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan.

"The media machinery can only handle so many stories at a time," explains Thompson. That is even truer when it comes to covering developing countries. Increasingly, media organizations are eliminating international bureaus. For example, Thompson estimates that there are now only three or four Canadian journalists based in Africa.

In 1994 the South African elections and the emergence of Nelson Mandela dominated those meagre media resources,



Allan Thompson

leaving remote Rwanda largely uncovered. At the time, Thompson himself was a reporter for *The Toronto Star* covering foreign affairs from Ottawa. He admits that "if anyone should have been aware of the situation in Rwanda, it was me."

Developing an interest in development

News from developing countries is usually a hard sell in and outside of newsrooms. Because news organizations think that their audience isn't interested in development issues they don't assign reporters to cover them. The onus, therefore, is on journalists themselves.

Thompson traces his interest in development issues to winning a Gemini fellowship from IDRC in the early 1990s. He argues that to improve and increase media coverage of developing countries and international development issues, interested parties should work from the ground up — targeting individual journalists early in their careers. "Just get young journalists to Africa and give them that life experience. Most of them will likely come back determined to go there again and write about it," he says.

It is this belief that prompted Thompson and his colleagues at Carleton University to set up a media internship program in Rwanda for Canadian journalism students. In the summer of 2006, 14 Carleton students worked for two months as interns at Rwanda's main English-language newspaper, the New Times. Although participants must pay their own way, Thompson expects even more students to apply for the program this year.

The internship program is one of the latest endeavours of [the Rwanda Initiative](#), a capacity-building project headed by Thompson. The Initiative is also building an archive of media and genocide documentation, and spearheaded a teaching partnership with the National University of Rwanda in Butare.

The Initiative, as well as the book, grew from a symposium held at Carleton in March 2004, just before the 10th anniversary of the genocide. *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide* includes several papers presented at the IDRC-sponsored symposium, and examines how African media outside of Rwanda treated the genocide. Senator Roméo Dallaire contributed a chapter.

"The purpose of looking back at the media's role in the Rwanda events is not just to remember," says Thompson. "We still have some learning to do on this subject and examining the way journalists and news organizations conducted themselves in 1994 is not just a historical exercise. Sadly, we don't yet seem to have fully discerned or absorbed the lessons from Rwanda."

Nadine Robitaille is the Managing Editor of the IDRC Bulletin.